

Oakland Equestrian Coalition

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Senate Natural Resources & Environmental Affairs Committee

House Great Lakes & Environment Committee

Subject: SB388 (Birkholz), SB 389 (Basham), HB 4677 (Warren), HB 4678 (Meekhof)

Dear Committee Members:

My name is Merle Richmond and I live in Commerce, Michigan. I am Coordinator of the Oakland Equestrian Coalition. I would like to encourage these committees to rule favorably on the Michigan State Passport Program for State Recreational Lands including parks and recreation areas. I feel there are three very compelling reasons for this legislation to be adopted.

First and foremost, I believe that it is our state and federal government's responsibility to provide areas for it's citizens to recreate in regardless of which form that may take. To do this our Department of Natural Resources here in Michigan needs a stable source of funding. When monies they received from the General Fund ceased a few years ago, entrance fees, camping fees, etc. provided barely enough money to run the operations with a skeleton crew. The infrastructure began to fall into disrepair. We have one of the most beautiful states in America and the potential to be even bigger in our area of tourism to enjoy nature, however our parks, recreation areas and campgrounds are looking quite shabby and having infrastructure failures. Many people say they don't use the parks and recreation areas. I believe this is mostly do to the entrance fee one must pay to use the parks. If there were no entrance fee, but every registered car paid a small fee that included admittance to our recreational lands, I believe more people would venture into these wonderful natural areas and begin to appreciate them. So as a state our government has a responsibility to provide natural areas for it's citizens to enjoy, since this is not something we can provide for ourselves, we should make funding it as simple as possible..

Secondly, we are repeatedly told that our citizens are overweight and do not get enough exercise. By not having to buy an annual park pass or a daily pass, I believe people would be more encouraged to get outdoors. With a stable funding source, as this legislation would provide, more innovative outdoor activities could be developed by the DNR personnel thus encouraging more users. Kids and families need to get away from their computers and televisions and other electronic gadgetry. People often feel more comfortable coming to an organized activity before they branch out on their own. Once citizens know what the wonderful natural world holds, they tend to be changed forever. They develop a greater respect for the natural areas. Since so many people are overweight, great parks would be an incentive to move more, which is in the long run the secret to weight management. Generally if you're interested in your surroundings and moving, you are not eating.

A third compelling reason is the economics of our natural areas. Well kept and managed recreational areas bring tourists. Many find spots they like and come back year after year. You

only have to look at the traffic leaving the city each weekend heading up north to know there are already many of us that enjoy these resources. These tourists bring economic benefits to the towns and villages near these parks. There is the potential for the state tourism industry to grow even more from our own residents and in addition tourists from our surrounding neighbors including Canada. With the auto industry on it's way down, the top two economic sectors in Michigan are Agriculture and Tourism. As an equestrian, I feel we are missing out on attracting trail riders from other states to Michigan. The rustic equestrian campgrounds are often in deplorable condition with hand pumps that don't give up their water easily, pit toilets that need pumping and a general lack of amenities. Trail riders are many times retired women, who are getting elderly and trail riding is the one form of exercise that they can still manage. With stable funding, hopefully the DNR could add some modern campgrounds with electricity and water to attract the serious trail riders with the rigs that are often self contained with their own bathrooms. I know trail riders from Michigan that go out of state, so they can have these amenities for only a few dollars more than our rustic campgrounds cost here in Michigan. We have such beautiful areas here to ride, we should be cashing in on our resources. Trails that connect riding areas are very popular as trail riders like destinations.

In closing, I am 69 years old, and have used our natural areas for hiking, cross country skiing, bird watching, bike riding and for the last 20 years riding a horse. I can no longer hike 10-12 miles or ride my bike 20 miles, but I can ride my horse for 8 hours and go 25 miles. Please provide the stable funding necessary to make Michigan's recreational lands the best in the country again. Remember, once parkland is gone, we can never get it back. It is our responsibility as citizens to see that we keep all that we have as it will only become more precious in the years to come.

In conclusion, it's a responsibility of government to provide natural areas to recreate in to maintain mental health of our citizens. We must do everything possible to encourage our citizens to get outdoors and move to maintain a healthy life style. And state revenues could increase tremendously by having better facilities in our state parks and recreation areas along with more organized activities designed to introduce this wonderful outdoor world to new users.

Thank you for allowing me to comment and encourage the passage of this legislation.

Sincerely,

Merle J. Richmond
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